Article:	**The Study of Semantic Change and its Effect on Linguistic and Literary Comprehension of ESL Learners**
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Online Published:	Fall 2019
Article DOI:	https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct.12.04
Article QR Code:	
To cite this article:	Khalid, A. (2019). The study of semantic change and its effect on linguistic and literary comprehension of ESL learners. *Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends, 1*(2), 43–54. Crossref

A publication of the
Institute of Communication and Cultural Studies
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

The Study of Semantic Change and its Effect on Linguistic and Literary Comprehension of ESL Learners

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Abstract

Language is continuously changing. Words change their meaning over time and this process is known as semantic change. Change can occur both in the literal meaning and in the pragmatic use of words. In this research, semantic change is studied from a different perspective. Words that go through rapid semantic changes are the focus of this study. Users of English as a second language are also the focus of this study. The study observes whether these users are able to keep up with semantic change. It also gives us an idea regarding how much the users know about the multiple meanings of the same words. Another aspect of this study is to find out whether semantic change affects the comprehension of literature containing the words which went through semantic change. This research was conducted through a close-ended questionnaire designed by selecting fifteen words which changed their meaning over time. The respondents were fifty in number and were all females who had different educational backgrounds. The results were analyzed through pie charts. The results showed that the majority of ESL learners are able to keep up with semantic change, although a significant proportion is still struggling to understand the process. The results also showed that the learners of English as a second language have little knowledge of the previous meanings of words. If a word which has changed its meaning over time occurs in any literary work, ESL learners are not able to comprehend its meaning as it is intended to be understood. This can be considered as a negative attribute of semantic change. So, it was concluded that ESL learners are able to keep up with the change but most of them are unable to comprehend literature as it is intended to be understood.

Keywords: semantic change, ESL learners, comprehension, language

Introduction

This chapter analyzes the process that is known as semantic change. The first part of the study covers the details of the methodology. Semantic change refers to the change in the meaning of a word over the course of time such as meat, girls, trolls and more are included in literature. These words affect the understanding of ESL learners. In this research, our focus will remain mainly on the broadening and

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narrowing of the meaning of words. Semantic change can be confusing to the users of language, particularly those users who have adopted the language in question as their second language. Haug (2008) pointed that in the act of communication interlocutors are seeking the most relevant interpretation. This creates a need for studying semantic change and its aftermath as well as how the users of English language deal with it. Recent works on semantic change have converged not on the results of the change but on pragmatic stimulating agents for change in the course of the speech. Grice (1989) shed light on the contributions of cognitive processes, such as analogical thinking, production of cues to interpret a message, and the perception or interpretation of meaning especially in grammaticalization.

1.1. Significance of the Research

This research has significance for understanding applied linguistics and literature. This study can be used as a medium to understand semantic change including the way it affects ESL learners.

1.2. Rationale

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of rapid semantic change on ESL learners and to find out if these changes are causing problems in the literary comprehension of students. It also studies whether students are able to keep up with semantic change or not.

1.3. Research Objectives

- To find out the way semantic changes influence ESL learners and users.
- To test the knowledge of ESL learners about the previous meanings of words or slangs that went through semantic change.
- To find out if the interpretation of English literature has been affected due to semantic change.

1.4. Research Hypothesis

The rapid semantic change occurring in the English language due to technological and social factors can affect students' understanding of the language and its use especially in the case of ESL learners.

1.5. Significance of Research

This research will give a broader and clearer picture of what constitutes semantic change. It will also show how semantic change is occurring rapidly in the current era and will also try to find out the implications of this rapid change in the meaning of words for ESL learners.

1.6. Research Gap

Researchers have studied semantic change before. However, the impact of this process on ESL learners and the interpretation of English literature has been mostly ignored. This research, however, gives a new perspective to semantic change. It will show how ESL learners are affected by this change and if the interpretation of literature is affected by semantic change.

1.7. Limitations

- There are countless words that have altered their meanings, however, not all of them can be incorporated into this research.
- Thousands of abbreviations and new words from other languages have been incorporated into the English language. Due to limited time and limited exposure, not all of them can be studied.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Semantic Change

Semantic change can be described as change in the meaning of words. It basically characterizes the evolution in the meaning of a word. Other terms used to describe semantic change include semantic progression, semantic shift, semantic drift, and semantic broadening. Semantic change can occur due to various factors. According to Aitchison (2003), in child base theory regarding any school of thought from generative to structuralism it was observed that there is no positive evidence found in language change to happen between generation gap. Later Aitchison (2013) stated that there are certain standard of correctness which should be adhered and ought to be follow by others. When the English language was adopted as a second language throughout the world, its usage started to change with the passage of time. Factors such as Code-switching has also added a lot of vocabulary to this language which later gave broader or expanded meanings to the language. "In the domain of meaning change, at least two reasons are observed. Firstly, on internal structure of semantic categories. Secondly, focusing the individual word rather than looking for entire corpus" (Geeraerts, 1997).

Hallman (2009) suggested three type of classification for the semantic change that are known as amelioration and pejoration, broadening and narrowing, metaphor and Semantic shift.

2.2. Types of Semantic Change

2.2.1. Semantic narrowing. Semantic narrowing can be defined as the change that makes the meaning of a word less general or totally opposite in meaning to the

previous use. It is also known as restriction or specialization. The opposite process is called generalization or semantic broadening. Tom McArthur, who is a well-known linguist, states that "such specialization is slow and need not be complete". For instance, the term "fowl is now usually restricted to the farmyard hen, but it retains its old meaning of 'bird' in expressions like the fowls of the air and wildfowl" (McArthur, 1992).

2.2.2. Semantic branching. In this kind of semantic change, the new meaning of words co-exists with the old meaning. None of the meanings are omitted.

For example, the word 'head' has a lot of meanings. It denotes mind as well as a part of the body. Moreover, it also denotes the head of different things like human and nail. The word also refers to an individual.

2.2.3. Semantic broadening. Broadening is a kind of semantic change in which the meaning of a particular expression develops into a wide-ranging or broader meaning as compared to its original meaning. It is also known as generalization, extension or expansion. The opposite procedure is known as semantic narrowing in which a word takes on a more constrained meaning as compared to its original meaning.

Victoria (2013) states that "when the meaning of a word becomes broader, it means everything it used to mean and more". For instance, tea in early literature and even now not only describes the drink made from numerous leaves but it also refers to any hot drink.

2.3. Pejoration

In this phenomenon, the word takes on a new meaning that also involves connotation. The newly formed meaning has a negative connotation attached to it. For example, a 'hussy' used to mean a housewife and it had no positive or negative connotation. However, with the passage of time it took on a negative connotation and now it means a disreputable woman. The process of developing a negative connotation from a neutral meaning can be observed in the given example.

2.4. Amelioration

This process is opposite to pejoration. In this process, the word takes on a positive connotation. Indeed, the meaning of the word does change but the newer meaning has a positive connotation attached to it. For example, the word 'queen' used to mean a woman but with the passage of time it underwent semantic change and now it means a respectable royalty.

2.5. Language Change

It is a well-known and established fact that every language changes over time. English is going through the same process. Change in the English language can be studied from various aspects; it can be semantic (meaning of language), pragmatic (social use of language), and may also constitute the addition of new words, phrases, and slangs. It can be surprising to observe language change. Crystal (2006) suggested the term "Netspeak" to refer to CMC as a single language variety. Emoticons, memes and abbreviations like LOL, LMAO, FML, BRB etc. are changing the way language is being used. The writings of classical writers like Shakespeare (16th century) are now considered hard to comprehend by present day speakers. The English language advanced swiftly in a few centuries. Why "semantic change" occurs? Keller (1994) explained that language changes due to various reasons. These reasons can be very diverse, from political pressure to colonization and invasions. Advanced technologies such as cell phones and developments in natural sciences require new words or change in the semantic meaning of the existing words. The reason of semantic change can also be the way users are living their lives, their social status, their age, kind of education and social interactions they have.

Semantics has been broadly studied in the past but its effect on ESL learners is also essential. This study thus observes how semantic change is affecting ESL learners.

3. Research Methodology

This section will analyze the research methodology. It will allow us to observe how the research was conducted in a detailed manner.

3.1. Nature of Research

This research is quantitative in nature.

3.2. Population

70 words were taken from the English language that have changed their meaning over the course of time. The questionnaire had 15 of these words and these questionnaires were given to undergraduate students of Kinnaird College for Women University and Lahore College for Women University. 50 students from different educational and social backgrounds who were ESL learners were handed over the questionnaires to fill.

3.3. Research Tool

Fifteen different words were included in the questionnaire to study the change in their usage and meanings.

3.4. Data Collection and Technique

The data were collected through different mediums. The use of words in old and modern literature was studied. Social media was also used to gather the required materials.

3.5. Analysis Technique

The old and new meanings of words were compared to find out the way the words were and are used. The impact of these words and their interpretation in generation "z" was analyzed.

3.6. Data Analysis

This chapter concludes the questions given in the questionnaire and the results of these questions are presented both through the graph and in theoretical form.

4. Discussion

Semantic change is a continuous process and it has been happening since forever. When language spreads, the use of language increases, when the language users increase connotations of words and their use in different scenarios increase. Semantic change is of different kinds, sometimes one meaning overtakes another meaning and sometimes multiple meanings are linked with the same word.

The interpretation of words like gay, hook up, cell, troll and sick is mostly dependent on the scenarios they are used in. Answering the first question, 65% of respondents marked the meaning of "gay" according to their knowledge as its correct usage. While 20% of them responded that the meaning of gay is "happy". The later meaning of gay could only be interpreted by 15% of respondents which is not attractive. The second question was designed to test the knowledge of ESL learners regarding the words which have changed their meaning over time. Most of the respondents chose "unpleasant" while some of them thought the meaning was 'awesome'. Only 20% of them chose the older meaning of the word which is 'awesome'. On the other hand, 80% of them chose "unpleasant" which is the current meaning of the word. The third question included a phrase that has broadened its meaning over the course of time. The broadening of meaning is also incorporated in the phenomenon of semantic change. This question was designed to test the use of the phrase in different scenarios. Half of the respondents chose

"having sexual intercourse". While 45% thought that the phrase's correct usage is to "meet up" with someone. Only 5% of respondents, which is considered to be a minority, thought that the phrase is used correctly while describing a situation when something is gotten to up and running. Answering the fourth question, only 30% of respondents said that they use the word to describe "physical illness". The meaning of the word "sick" has broadened. 55% of respondents said that they use the word sick for something that is disturbing. On the other hand, 15% of respondents expressed that they use the word with its latest meaning which is to describe something that is amazing. Answering the fifth question, 20% of respondents thought the right choice was "body part". 35% of respondents expressed that they use it to define phones. Prion was chosen by 45% of respondents.

ESL leaners are acquainting themselves with new meanings as well. Answering the next question, a large majority which constituted more than four fifth of respondents said that "fantastic" is used to describe something that is incredible. Less than a fifth of respondents thought that fantastic means something that only exists in someone's imagination. Pie charts are given to illustrate the findings of the rest of the first section of the questionnaire. In the literature section of the questionnaire, most of the respondents were unable to comprehend the sentences correctly and they chose options which showed the latest meanings of words. When the meaning of a word changes it also spreads among its users and over the course of time these words are only known for their new meanings. Words like tag, timeline, tweet are usually linked with social media, although their original meaning was different and they were used differently. This research is focused on the English language and the change in the meaning of words in this language. For those users who are not using English as their first language and who are surrounded by the users of their native language which is not English, keeping up with semantic change can be a challenge. In this research, the focus remains on ESL learners and users and the impact of semantic change on them. In this regard, different ESL learners from different educational backgrounds were targeted. The research has three main aspects. The first aspect is whether users who use English as their second language are able to keep up with the change in the meaning of words. The majority of users know the changed meanings of words which means that they are able to keep up with the change. The second aspect is the role of social media in spreading and causing semantic change. It is concluded at the end of the research that the majority of undergraduate students is particularly aware of the change in the meaning of words caused by social media. These students know the new meanings and they use the words in scenarios where the new meaning is applicable. Social media is a big factor that keeps on changing the meaning of

words. But to keep the user of language on the same page, the choice of the medium is very important. The third aspect of the research shows the negative effect of semantic change on ESL students. When the words change their meaning, there is also a down side of the situation. Words which were used in literature to mean differently now give it a different interpretation. One of the tools that preserves the language is literature. There are many words in English literature that have actually changed meaning over time. Words focused in this research was girls, meat and cheater etc. ESL learners were not able to comprehend the written literature correctly. Every single word has a role in the correct interpretation of meaning. If the meaning of words has changed but they were used in literature differently. The true essence of literature altered and that can be problematic. The results of the research depict that the majority of ungraduated students are unable to interpret the old meaning of words included in the literature.

Change in the meaning of words is a continuous process and it is also a slow process. The latest innovations in technology have made communication fast. Moreover, when people from different cultural backgrounds and different ethnicities come together at one platform they bring different connotative meanings and cultural meanings with them. If these meanings are relatable to other users of language, they adopt them. The increase of memes in everyday life has showed that making pun out of daily life troubles provides a way of catharsis to language users. In the same way, the more relatable the new meaning is, the more it is spread throughout the world. Once this meaning is adopted by different people, it becomes the new meaning.

5. Conclusion

Semantic change is a continuous process. ESL learners are affected by this change. Most of them keep up with the acquisition of new meanings. Although, a considerable number of respondents were unable to keep up with semantic change. Social media has speeded up the rate of change in meaning and it also helps to create new meanings. Moreover, it is a platform that is used to spread new meanings as well. So, it has a lot of effect on ESL learners as they continue to adopt new meanings although they use English as their second language. Social media is a medium which brings all speakers of English at the same page. Also, ESL learners are unable to comprehend the right meaning of the literature that contains words which went through semantic change. So, semantic change has a bad impact on ESL learners. Semantic change seems to be a rapidly occurring phenomenon. However, ESL learners are able to keep up with the new meanings. The old

meanings are lost and that makes it difficult to provide a true interpretation of English literature by ESL learners.

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Questionnaire

1. What does the word "gay" mean?

a) happy   b) not attractive c) homosexual

2. What does the word "awful" mean?

a) awesome b) unpleasant

3. What does the phrase "hook up" mean?

a) meeting up b) having sexual intercourse c) getting some service up and running

4. When do you use the word "sick"?

a) when something is amazing b) when something is disturbing c) when you are physically ill

5. In your opinion, what does the word "cell" mean?

a) prison b) body part c) phones

6. Fantastic means

a) existing only in one's imagination b) something that is incredible

7. What does "naughty" mean according to your understanding?

a) evil or immoral b) badly behaved c) someone who has nothing

8. What does the word "troll" mean?

a) provocative online posting with the aim of upsetting someone b) ugly dwarfs c) a method of fishing

9. What does the word "terrible" mean?

a) Causing terror   b) awe inspiring c) severe or harsh

10. Who is a "hussy"?

a) housewife b) disreputable woman

11. How do you use the word "timeline" in your daily routine?

a) a table listing important events b) a collection of online posts or updates

12. How do you use the word "tag" in your daily routine?

a) to supply with an identifying marker b) to attach as an addition c) to link to someone else's profile in a social media post

13. According to your knowledge, mark the correct meaning of bolded words mentioned in the sentences below.

I. In daunger hadde he at his owene gise/ The yonge girles of the dioces (*The Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer)

a) People b) young lady c) a young woman with whom a man is romantically involved

II. Our guides told us, that the horses could not travel all day without rest or meat

(*A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), Samuel Johnson)

a) food b) flesh of an animal

III. "a most vile, flagitious man, a sorry and naughty Governour as could be."

(Sermons preached upon Several Occasions (1678), Isaac Barrow)

a) he had nothing b) he was wicked/morally bad c) mischievous d) sexually provocative

IV. "[A] Cheater may pick the purses of ignorant people, by shewing them something like the Kings Broad Seal, which was indeed his own forgery."

(William Gurnall wrote in 1662)

a) a dishonest gamester b) an officer appointed to look after the king's *escheats*